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Excerpt

“It is not by coincidence, but a *natural consequence and continuation* of our history that our political independence should be *restored* in the form of a democratic Republic.”¹

What is the meaning of history? Does Czech history carry an inherent sense, an intrinsic task, a moral principle? Masaryk’s quote above illustrates the romanticist idea of Herder that the history of mankind is continuously moving toward the divine ideal of Humanity. Masaryk regarded history as a progressive unfolding toward the universal goal of Humanity. Czech independence represented a distinct step in a distinct epoch. In his first historical study *Česká otázka* (The Czech question), published in 1895, Masaryk presented his philosophical view of the meaning of Czech history:

“Humanity is our final national and historical goal, Humanity is the Czech program.”²

His war memoirs *Světová revoluce* (The making of a State) reveal not only interesting insights to his exile activities. In his philosophical interpretations of the Great War, he applied his political ethics, assessing the war as a humanist revolution that rightfully toppled the monopolies of power of the aristocracy and the Catholic clergy, old forces that could not be reconciled with the principles of Humanity. The Czechoslovak troops fighting at the side of the allies confirmed *ex post* two philosophical facts to him: first, the Czechoslovaks understood that Humanity was the principal task of their national and human existence. Second, by joining the allies in the global revolution against absolutism, aristocratism, and theocratism, the Czechoslovaks entered the next phase of world history. This era represented a further step in the progression toward an ever-higher level of organization, embodied in the evolutionary development of democratic states³.

Masaryk’s main historical theorem, which he delivered in *Česká otázka*, reads: Embodied in democracy and true faith, the distinct Czech Humanity had ever since been a fundamental element in the history of the Czechs. The results of his historical studies raised vehement critique. Historians denied his analysis any scientific relevance, because not conducted with proper historical methods. Given Masaryk’s usual preference for scientific objectivity, what was the intention of *Česká otázka*? The thought that Masaryk wished to legitimate his own political program on the background and legitimacy of Czech history, that he saw himself as the intellectual father of the new and democratic phase of Czech history, is plausible. The contents of *Česká otázka* seem to support this thought, as Masaryk declared his Humanity program as the final political phase of Czech history, which had ever since been determined by the ideals of democracy and independence. Ján Hus and the *awakeners*

Palacký and Havlíček represented the beginning historic movement toward Humanity⁴, which ended in the 1890s with Masaryk's Realism⁵. He considered Czechoslovak democracy as the perfection of Humanity in political terms and his program of Humanity as legacy of the Reformation and the national awakening alike – which made him the direct successor of Hus, Palacký, and Havlíček. How did Masaryk substantiate his theorem of the continuity of a democratic element in Czech history?

“Ignited by the French Revolution, the European movement and the emerging national and political enthusiasm appeared with great vehemence in our nation as well as in other Slavonic nations. It was the epoch of National Renaissance.”⁶

Humanity was a philosophical and historical value promoted by Joseph Dobrovský, Jan Kollár, František Palacký, and Karel Havlíček as main representatives. Following Herder's appraisal of the Slavs, they gave crucial impulses to revive language, culture, and national identity. The awakeners aimed at ending the “sleep” of the nation, imposed by the Habsburg authorities after the defeat at the White Mountain (*Bílá Hora*) in 1620. They used the ideals of the Reformation, love of the next and freedom of choice of religious affiliation, to relieve the nation from centuries of slumber. Masaryk's argumentation reads further that the awakeners should be considered the successors of Ján Hus and the Bohemian Brethren, since they carried forward the humanist legacy of the Reformation⁷. Yet, was the humanistic ideal of the Czech Reformation identical to the idea of humanity as philosophical idea of the Enlightenment? How did Masaryk philosophically connect humanity, democracy, and history?

History was not a succession of random events but determined by divine providence. Inconceivable to the human mind, providence bore a distinct plan that mirrored the existence of god. Every epoch and nation had its end within itself⁸. The completion of the epochs or, phases of development, however, was not determined by an inner consistent logic man could disclose. Divine power alone set an end to the phases and determined the tasks of history. Following the Herderian idea of humanity as the ultimate goal of mankind's history, Masaryk set his Humanity as goal of Czech history. His Humanity combined Jesus' love for the next with the political demands of *Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité* of the French Revolution. The social, psychological, and religious impact of both constituent elements formed the historical progression. In other words: one should not consider the appearance of the conservative-liberal Palacký⁹ and the democratic-liberal Havlíček¹⁰ as coincidence, as both represented the historic continuum of ethics, read Humanity. Replacing Palacký's conservative attitudes with his demands for social justice, Havlíček initiated the next step toward the goal of Humanity. The prevailing political conditions in 19th Century Bohemia caused the appearance of Palacký and Havlíček, explaining the “How”, how Humanity as the least common denominator of all

awakeners was realized, how it appeared. There was, however, no answer to the “Why”: why did Hus, Palacký, and Havlíček appear in history? The answer, so Masaryk believed, was beyond human reason, for man’s limited intellectual facilities could never understand divine providence. As faithful Protestant, Masaryk was convinced that the divine will was manifest in the perspective of eternity, a metaphysical framework. This framework he called *sub specie aeternitatis*.

Humanity was sense and goal of Czech history. Therefore, if one accepted the existence of a divine order that ruled everything through time and space, one had to come to the conclusion that it was not man, who created individual freedom, responsibility, and self-determination. This religious element in Masaryk’s thought allowed him to *ex post* anticipate the Enlightenment ideas of freedom and equality in his nation-building theory: the essentially humanist ideas of individual and national freedom appeared in Czech history some three centuries before the Enlightenment. In his view, Hus and the Bohemian Brethren understood very early that freedom consisted in the individual choice of religious faith and conscience¹¹. Regarding Jesus as the legitimate leader of Christianity, they refused to recognize the pope as representative of god. Replacing Latin with medieval Czech as language of liturgy, the reformators demonstrated their critique of the clergy and spiritual distance from Rome. The significance of the Czech language was therefore not a result of the Czech reformation, nor its underpinning motivation, let alone the expression of a then unknown national feeling¹². Masaryk considered the struggle for religious freedom starting in 14th Century as *forerunner* of the linguistic, cultural, and national revival in 18th and 19th Centuries. The *reformators* planted the seeds of freedom, which the *awakeners* took up and continued with their means. The failure of the Hussite movement was the result of its lack of determination, not because the fundamental idea of freedom was wrong. Masaryk called the *Tabor* movement unnatural (*nepřirozené*), since it emerged from impulse, hence lacked careful planning typical of diligent and thorough thinking¹³.

The merits of the awakeners were their engagement in *factions or aspects of individual and national freedom*. In Isaiah Berlin’s terms, the awakeners contributed to the freedom of political and cultural determination by defining freedom to national and political identity and self-determination¹⁴. In the epoch of enlightened absolutism, Joseph Dobrovský (1753-1829) prepared the renaissance of the Czech language. Ján Kollár’s (1793-1852) humanistic idea of *literary reciprocity* gave crucial impulses to Slavic cultural identity¹⁵. František Palacký (1798-1876) was the author of the first history of Bohemia and, as politician, committed to federalizing the Empire. His draft of the Austrian federation of 1848 would have granted the nationalities significant autonomy rights, but had not stood the slightest chance of realization. Palacký defined statehood as based on the historic rights of the Bohemian crown and the nations’ natural right to equality; he introduced the new concept of statehood overcoming the romanticist Herderian idea that only nations were natural organs of the family of mankind, while states were artificial constructions. For Masaryk, Czech self-understanding as political subject would be impossible without Palacký’s contributions. Havlíček, the most modern of the awakeners, also pursued the goal of

equality of the monarchy's nations. But, unlike the conservative Palacký, who considered social inequality and the nobility's privileges as unalterable facts, Havlíček promoted the issue of social justice. He was committed to general suffrage, while Palacký after 1848, supported the Imperial constitution, separating the population into estates with limited rights. For the ardent democrat Havlíček, parliamentarism, general suffrage, and democracy were basic rights, which would guarantee the integration of the lower classes into Czech society. The awakeners promoted Humanity with peaceful, religious, diligent, didactic, political, and social means:

“Not by violence, but peacefully, not by sword, but plug, not by blood, but work, but with life towards life – that is the answer of the Czech genius, the meaning of our history and the legacy of our great ancestors.”¹⁶

How did Masaryk connect Humanity with Democracy? There is one *caveat*: analyzing Masaryk's interpretation of history, one has to omit an assessment of his ideas according to historic objectivity. Such historic analysis would directly lead to the above-mentioned Czech *Historikerstreit*, the controversy surrounding the meaning of Czech history. Masaryk conceived of democracy as factions of various diverse freedoms; his definition of democracy shall be referred to with upper case.

Two passages in *Česká otázka* prove the mutual relation of Democracy and Humanity. First, Masaryk mentioned the Hussite movement's split into minor hostile factions, which resulted in the defeat of the Czech reformation, when “...violence fell by violence, Czech democracy fell [*pádla demokracie česká*], descended by its own disorder”¹⁷. Second, he explicitly spoke of democracy (*pojém demokratismu*) as extensive (*extensivně*) and intensive (*intensivně*) Humanity, referring to Palacký and Havlíček's notions of the concept¹⁸. The sum of the *factions of freedoms* or the phases preparing democracy could be called a *historical process of democratization*. In fighting Catholic supremacy, Hus and his followers aimed at democratizing religion, making it subject to individual choice. Comenius spread the idea of religious freedom and anti-clerical egalitarianism in his exile. Palacký was concerned with the extensive form of freedom by democratizing the relationship of the Czech nation with the power centre Vienna. Havlíček, by contrast, focused on the intensive form of freedom by promoting social issues within the nation. In Masaryk's view, the Reformation and national renaissance brought forward thinkers, who were committed to the principles of love of the next and tolerance and pluralism as essential aspects of Democracy.

An invisible, spiritual, and intellectual struggle against aristocratic and clerical hierarchies, perceived as illegitimate, connected the awakeners. Hus, Comenius, and the Bohemian Brethren challenged the illegitimate power of Rome, while Palacký questioned the legitimacy of Vienna's centralist structure. Havlíček fought against the social exclusion of the lower classes. On a first glance, Dobrovský and Kollár do not seem to fit into Masaryk's *movement of factional democratization*. On a second,

however, their contributions to the linguistic and cultural renaissance challenged the Imperial languages German and Hungarian insofar, as they limited the influence of their cultures. Dobrovský and Kollár therefore set the fundamental communicative basis, which made Palacký and Havlíček's political work possible.

Until 1918, Masaryk used the term "democratic" exclusively to describe the elements of freedom and equality appearing in Czech history at the beginning of the middle Ages. In the historic context of the *Czech question*, he refused to speak of democracy as procedure, but the system he had in mind was close to U.S. democracy. His definition of Czech history as Humanity and *factional democratization* supports the assumption that he thought of a democratic nation-state as early as 1895. He was, however, a Realist too much and too less an idealist as to pursue this goal in circumstances that were far from supportive. He dated the end of his personal and political attachment to the Monarchy officially by 1907¹⁹, the year Vienna introduced general suffrage. The fact that the Socialdemocrats won the elections in Bohemia had certainly encouraged his careful optimism that the Monarchy was losing its legitimacy among the nationalities.

Party strategies certainly played a role in Masaryk's interpretation of Czech history, as a substantial part of *the Czech question* includes critique of the Old- and Young Czech agendas. His main intention, however, was to create a national program, which would continue the work of the awakeners and overcome the unsuccessful politicizing of the liberal parties. Such a program had to be based on the politically feasible and respond to national and social needs. It should further provide a preparation for the future: Masaryk considered *de-Austrianisation* as part of nation-building. The nation should rid itself of particular social norms and behavioral patterns it had adopted during the centuries of Habsburg rule. The Czech program of Humanity was a didactical *must*; if the nation's goal was sovereignty based on popular representation, the citizens, still used to be the passive recipients of governmental decisions, should become actively involved. Tolerance, pluralism, responsibility and, above all, *drobná práce* (small works) as the daily and unspectacular activities for the national cause should pave the way toward citizens' participation. Even in times unfavorable to independent statehood, the fundamental values and ideas of Democracy should be present in the minds and hearts of the people. Political circumstances were one issue; quite another was the nation's understanding of the deeper sense of its history. While the first could not be altered, the latter was of critical importance, as the lack of a past would result in confused views of the future, thus cause mistakes in times of acute decision-making. History and his interpretations of it in *Česká otázka* had a clear function in Masaryk's thought: they were the fundament of Czech identity, hence a necessary condition for the democratic polity to emerge. Regardless of its flaws, Masaryk's Czech national program was intellectually powerful enough to turn into the theory of Czechoslovak nation- and state building in WWI.

¹ Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 475, italics by me.

² Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 186.

³ Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 439.

⁴ Josef Kaizl, “České myšlenky,” in *Spor o smyslů Českých Dějin 1895-1938* (Praha: Torst, 1995), 47-97. Kaizl criticized parts of *Česká otázka* in his article with the slightly contemptuous title “Czech mini ideas” or “Czech petty ideas”.

⁵ The historians Josef Pekář and Jaroslav Goll were his most critical adversaries. Masaryk’s former colleagues of the “Realists”, Josef Kaizl, the journalist Jan Herben and the philosopher Josef Ludvík Fischer, participated in the first period of the controversy, which lasted from 1895 until 1938. For an excellent introduction and re-edition of the main texts of the controversy see Miloš Havelka, ed. *Spor o smyslů Českých Dějin 1895-1938*. Praha: Torst, 1995.

The polemic debate *Český úděl* (The Czech fate) between Milan Kundera and Václav Havel is as much a part of the historic discourse as Jan Patočka’s *Co jsou Češi?* (What are the Czechs?) or Rio Preisner’s essay *Česká existence* (The Czech existence). In the aftermath of 1989 the debate restarted with additional reflections on totalitarianism and Europeanness. See for example Jaroslav Krejčí, *O Češství a Evropanství. O českém národním charakteru* (1. díl) (Osnabrück, Ostrava: Amosium servis, 1993); Ján Křen, *Historické proměny Češství* (Praha: Univerzita Karlová, 1992); Rudolf Kučera, *Kapitoly z dějin střední evropy* (Praha: ISE, 1992) and Jiří Neměc, *Únos Evropy. Mýtus – divertimento k filozofii dějin* (Praha: Ministerstvo kultury ČR, Dauphin, 1994).

⁶ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 13.

⁷ For a detailed assessment of the Czech Reformation see Zdeněk V. David, *Finding the Middle Way. The Utraquists Liberal Challenge to Rome and Luther* (Washington D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2005).

⁸ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 9.

⁹ A seminal political biography is Jiří Kořalka’s *František Palacký (1798-1876): Životopis* (Praha: Argo, 1998).

¹⁰ Good biographies on Karel Havlíček are Thomas G. Pešek, *Karel Havlíček and the origins of Czech Political Life* (Ann Arbor MI: University Microfilms International, 1981) and Barbara K. Reinfeld, *Karel Havlíček (1821-1856). A national Liberation Leader of the Czech Renaissance* (Boulder, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

¹¹ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 17.

¹² Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 159.

¹³ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 173. According to a medieval tradition, villages and mountains were given names from the Old Testament. The Taborists, whose headquarters was the region of the *Tabor* Mountain near Prague, represented the radical wing of the Hussite movement. Masaryk considered the movement’s disunity as the main reason for the defeat of Hussite troops in the battle of Lipány in 1434 by Utraquist and Catholic nobility.

¹⁴ Isaiah Berlin, “Two concepts of Liberty,” in *The proper Study of Mankind* (London: Pimlico, 1991), 191-242.

¹⁵ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 23.

¹⁶ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 121.

¹⁷ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 177.

¹⁸ Masaryk, *Česká otázka*, 92-93.

¹⁹ Masaryk, *Světová revoluce*, 30.